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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000224

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/01/2018

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SUBJECT: SENIOR SYRIAN DISSIDENT EXPRESSES VIEWS ON THE
OPPOSITION, U.S. SUPPORT

REF: A. DAMASCUS 0203

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 0176

[1](#)C. 07 DAMASCUS 1156

Classified By: CDA Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b and d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On March 30, opposition Damascus Declaration National Council (DDNC) leader Riad al-Turk updated us on the current state of the DDNC and its attempts to move forward after the arrest of many of its members. Key among these activities are establishing its abilities to meet inside Syria and reaching out to external opposition groups such as the moderate Islamists Movement for Justice and Development (MJD). Turk emphasized that in order to help the internal Syrian opposition, the U.S. needed to continue its political pressure on the regime. Turk was, however, less sanguine about direct financial and material U.S. support. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On the evening of March 30, Pol/Econ Chief met with senior DDNC leadership figure Riad al-Turk, who is also head of the People's Democratic Party. Also in attendance was prominent defense lawyer Khalil Matook who is defending the DDNC detainees as well as imprisoned opposition figures Kamal Labwani and Anwar al-Bunni.

SECURITY CRACKDOWN INTENSIFYING

[1](#)3. (C) Turk began with a general overview of the security situation and the ongoing SARG crackdown. According to Turk, the crackdown was taking place all over the country. Turk said that the DDNC had been severely hit in cities along the coast and Hassakeh province, but it remained operational, though significantly weakened, in Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Turk postulated that the government's harsh repression of internal opposition was in part due to the March 28-30 Arab League Summit in Damascus and/or its fears of an Israeli attack (in response to a possible Hizballah response to the Mughnieh assassination). As evidence of the continuing crackdown, which extended beyond the DDNC, Turk told us that the SARG had recently arrested and interrogated three far-removed advocates of Washington-based Syrian exile and SARG commentator Ammar Abdul Hamid's organization. Turk also mentioned the SARG's tough response to Kurdish Nohruz celebrations (ref A). In addition, there had been a visible rise in the presence of security forces throughout the

country suggesting the SARG was concerned by external and internal political challenges.

DDNC ACTIVITIES AND STRUCTURE

14. (C) According to Turk, of the 17 members elected to the DDNC secretariat, five are now in prison and two have quit or stopped actively participating, leaving ten active secretariat members. In addition to the secretariat, DDNC

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members also elected an executive committee of five. Two of them, DDNC executive committee head Riad Seif and civil society activist Ali Abdullah, were arrested in December 2007 as part of the government's crackdown. Turk said that he, Nawaf Basheer and Amin al-Abdi, who make up the remaining three, still meet at least weekly.

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CONTINUED DIFFICULTIES FOR DDNC PRISONERS
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15. (C) Responding to our questions about the conditions of the DDNC prisoners, Matook confirmed earlier Post reporting (ref B) by noting that any visits from family or legal counsel were closely monitored by prison guards. DDNC notables Akram al-Bunni (secretary), Fida, a Hourani (president) and Riad Seif (executive committee head) still needed serious medical treatment, and the prisoners now had to buy their own medicine from the prison authorities, Matook reported. Turning to the legal proceedings, Matook opined the government's reluctance to bring the DDNC prisoners to trial was odd and hard to explain. By focusing on the

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language used by the DDNC to criticize the regime's regional policies, the SARG seemed to be attempting to brand all the DDNC defendants as treasonous, but to do so would require stretching the meaning of the words in the DDNC statement. (Note: The regime's emphasis on the language of the DDNC declaration tracks with other post reporting.)

THREE SHORT TERM GOALS FOR THE DDNC

16. (C) Turk said that the post-crackdown DDNC had three main thrusts of action. First, its members wanted to repair and strengthen the regional branches of the DDNC that had been disrupted by the regime's crackdown. Specifically, their goal was to encourage them to resume regular meetings. Along the same lines, DDNC had focused on providing its jailed leaders with the best legal defense possible and channeling financial and other assistance to their families. Though hindered by heavy government scrutiny, Turk maintained the DDNC was achieving modest success in this area.

17. (C) Second, DDNC members not in prison were looking for new ways to communicate amongst themselves and with the outside world, with a view towards eventually unifying expat Syrian opposition movements under the DDNC banner. Turk acknowledged this was an ambitious goal but argued the DDNC had made some headway. Turk said that there was a DDNC website that continued to issue statements and help members send messages to each other. The DDNC was also exerting considerable energy to ramp up its outreach activities. According to Turk, the DDNC is now working closely with the MJD's offices in Europe while the MJD operated in the U.S. and Europe under the banner of the DDNC.

18. (C) Third, Turk said he personally was leading efforts to improve relations with the Arab Socialist Union Party and the Communist Action Party, both of which had dropped out of the DDNC's forerunner the Damascus Declaration in December 2007

after the creation of the DDNC (ref C). Turk said the goal of this outreach was to mitigate the criticism of these groups and to bring them back into a unified political opposition if possible.

¶9. (C) Turk emphasized his willingness to work with any opposition group and his desire to unite disparate forces who opposed the regime. Turk said that, unlike some of his DDNC colleagues, he personally had no problem with reaching out to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), but he acknowledged this was not a popular option with many DDNC members. (Comment: Unlike Seif, Turk has a long history of interacting with the MB, going back to the 1980s when the MB staged protests and attacks in Hama. After the Syrian Army leveled Hama, Turk was arrested and served nearly 20 years in prison, most of it in solitary confinement.)

ASSESSING U.S. PRIORITIES

¶10. (C) Turk opined that Lebanon, and therefore Syria by extension, were not Washington priorities. Turk said that USG designations of Syrian individuals, like Rami Makhoul, would eventually have a cumulative effect on the regime, but this tactic thus far consisted of one-off actions and would take a long time to have an impact. Turk said the DDNC needed political support from the U.S. and other Western powers, specifically in the form of more pressure against the regime. Turk was very hesitant, however, to discuss any type of financial or material support from the USG to the DDNC. Finally, Turk urged Washington to speak to all Syrian opposition groups with a single voice and message. Turk cautioned against falling into the trap of the external Syrian opposition's factionalized squabbling.

¶11. (C) Comment. The lengthy conversation with Turk indicated that although the DDNC has been greatly damaged by the regime's crackdown, it still remains active and has demonstrated a level of resiliency in keeping its activities going. Moreover, the DDNC seems to have the ability to obtain good information about what the government is doing

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(such as the arrest and interrogation of the Hamid supporters) and put together a solid team of highly respected defense lawyers. Turk's willingness to reach out to other opposition groups demonstrates that he realizes the DDNC must expand to its base of support. On the other hand, Turk also seems more cautious, especially with regard to USG material support, than other DDNC leaders like Riad Seif.
CORBIN